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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BRUSSELS 001552

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR GUTMAN'S NOVEMBER 13 MEETING WITH UNGA  
PRESIDENT CANDIDATE LOUIS MICHEL

REF: BRUSSELS 1498 (NOTAL)

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Classified By: Ambassador Howard Gutman, reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

¶1. (U) The Ambassador met privately with Louis Michel, former Foreign Minister of Belgium and European Commissioner for Development, on November 13. Michel was accompanied by the Chief of Staff to Foreign Minister Yves Leterme, Fransiskus Van Daele.

¶2. (C) Michel and the Ambassador discussed the contentious issue of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (BHV) (reftel) in Belgian politics. Michel, a francophone politician who is a member of the European-style liberal Mouvement Reformateur (MR) party, told the Ambassador that his preferred solution to the problem is to make into a province, thereby solving the constitutional problem that its borders as an electoral district do not coincide with provincial boundaries. Michel believes that it is inevitable that the Belgian federal government will have to cede more of its powers to the regions than it already has in the course of any compromise solution to Belgium's institutional problems. He said he agreed only partially with the Ambassador's observation that a stronger economy in Wallonia, bringing its economic strength more in line with Flanders', might make finding a solution to the conflict between the two regions easier. Michel said that if Herman Van Rompuy becomes European Council President, and Yves Leterme becomes Prime Minister in his stead, it will exacerbate the difficulties in finding a compromise solution to the institutional issues in Belgium.

¶3. (C) Michel took pains to present himself to the Ambassador as a friend to Israel. He said that he had taken significant criticism for a statement he made while visiting sites of destruction in Gaza in January 2009. Michel reportedly said that Hamas bore enormous responsibility for the destruction and was acting in the way of a terrorist organization. At the same time he termed the Israeli bombardment of Gaza an abomination and its failure to protect civilians a breach of international law. He called for both sides to be held accountable.

¶4. (C) In 2008, Louis Michel and his son, Charles, who is the Belgian Minister of Development Cooperation, openly and strongly criticized then Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht for alienating President Kabila of the Democratic Republic of Congo, a former Belgian colony, by uncompromisingly speaking of corruption and misgovernment. Michel has advocated that Belgium reassert its expertise in the region, strengthen diplomatic ties and increase development aid. He is thought to harbor dreams of returning to the position of Foreign Minister of Belgium. Some Belgian politicians have been heard to say it will be better to have him in New York at UNGA rather than Brussels.

¶5. (C) Biographic information: Louis Michel has enjoyed successful careers in both politics and the private sector. From 1968 to 1978 he worked as a teacher of English, Dutch and German at the Provincial School of Jodoigne in Belgium. His political career began in 1967 when he served as Chairman of the Young Liberals in the Nivelles district of Belgium (1967-1977). In 1977 Michel became an Alderman in Jodoigne (1977-1983). In 1978 he became a member of the Belgian Federal Parliament, serving first as a Representative (1978-1999) and then as a Senator (1999-2004). In 1980 he became the Secretary General of the Parti Reformateur Liberal (PRL) (1980-1982). From 1982 to 1990 he served as Chairman of the PRL and again from 1995 to 1999. In 1999 Michel became the Belgian Foreign Minister and Vice Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Belgium. He held these posts until July 2004 when the then Verhofstadt government appointed him as a candidate for the Belgian seat on the next (Barroso) European Commission starting in November 2004. In September 2004, Michel stepped in to complete the term of then Commissioner Busquin, Commissioner for Science and Research. In November 2004 he assumed the responsibilities of European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Development under the Barroso Commission. His term ended in 2009, the same year he was elected to the European Parliament from Belgium. Throughout his political career Michel has often held short-term and/or temporary seats or offices. He has published numerous articles and has been awarded more than 10 high honors and recognition including the Minister of State conferred in ¶1995. This is an honorific title given to prominent Belgian politicians. Louis Michel is married and has two children. He is fluent in French, Dutch, German and English.

GUTMAN

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